

## THE UNFOLDING TALE OF GRIFFES'S "WHITE PEACOCK"

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Soon after arriving in Berlin for the first time in August 1903, the American composer Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1885–1920) visited the Zoological Garden and in a letter described his discovery: “Among the peacocks . . . a pure white one—very curious.”<sup>1</sup> According to Griffes’s first biographer,

Since his first glimpse of the bird in Germany Griffes seems to have been stirred by some symbolic dimension in it. . . . He clipped pictures of white peacocks from wherever discovered, and there is one large awkward photograph that he may have taken himself.<sup>2</sup>

In 1915 this personal fascination turned into artistic inspiration when he composed his best-known piano work, “The White Peacock,” the first of a set of four pieces entitled *Roman Sketches*, Op. 7. This piano solo, which he later orchestrated, is a musical tribute to a poem written by William Sharp (1855–1905), a Scottish poet who is better known by the pen name he adopted during the final stage of his career: Fiona Macleod. Apparently, Griffes conceived the opening phrase while gazing at a sunset on a train between Manhattan and Tarrytown (New York) where he worked at the Hackley Boys School.<sup>3</sup> The orchestral transcription of this work received its premiere in 1919 in the form of a ballet for solo dancer and orchestra, choreographed by Adolph Bolm at the Rivoli Theater in New York. Its performance that same year by the

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Maisel, *Charles T. Griffes: The Life of an American Composer*, “updated edition” (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Maisel, *Charles T. Griffes*, 154.

<sup>3</sup> Maisel, *Charles T. Griffes*, 154.

Philadelphia Orchestra under Stokowski, as well as the abundant critical praise it received, were among the high points of Griffes's career.

In recent decades, scholarly interest in Griffes's music has been passionate if intermittent, including the publication of performing editions, recordings, an annotated bibliography, and two detailed biographies by Edward Maisel and Donna K. Anderson.<sup>4</sup> However, in all this critical activity, two things have been absent: close analytical readings of the formal, harmonic, and motivic organization found in the late works;<sup>5</sup> and a historical and cultural interpretation of the music-aesthetic principles on which those readings depend. The present essay attempts to fill this gap by integrating historical, analytical, and literary perspectives in an interdisciplinary study of "The White Peacock." My thesis is twofold. First, Griffes's tone poem underlines his ties to European artistic culture by reviving and celebrating the peacock, one of the most vivid symbols of the late-Victorian literary movement called "aestheticism." Second, a strong correspondence exists between the poem's central image—the bird's unfolding tail—and three aspects of Griffes's work: (1) his style of "motivic magnification," in which the initial lush dominant ninth chord is transformed into composed-out melodic spans in the bass; (2) a strategic expansion of register coinciding with the recapitulation; and (3) his unusual treatment of form, which in the final measures suggest perpetual repetition. Indeed, the work's formal ambiguities capture well the subtle spiritual mysteries evoked by Sharp's poem.

Griffes grew to maturity during a time when the artistic ideals of Europe (and particularly Germany) still dominated musical life in America. Virtually all of the leading American

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<sup>4</sup> Maisel, *Charles T. Griffes*; Donna K. Anderson, *Charles T. Griffes: A Life in Music* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993); and Anderson, *Charles T. Griffes: An Annotated Bibliography-Discography* (Detroit: Information Coordinators [for College Music Society], 1977).

<sup>5</sup> However, there are several exceptions to this lacuna, including the detailed discussion of the Piano Sonata in Maisel, *Charles T. Griffes*, 272–287; and Jonathan Lee Chenette, "Synthetic Scales, Charles Griffes, and *The Kairn of Koridwen*" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1984).

composers a generation older than Griffes trained in European conservatories and heard their music first performed in America by ensembles led by Europeans or European-trained conductors.<sup>6</sup> He, too, studied in Berlin for four years, and his early songs bear a strong German imprint.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, Griffes—along with a handful of young American composers such as John Alden Carpenter and Edward Burlingame Hill—began looking to France for musical inspiration. There is considerable biographical evidence that Griffes was intimately familiar with fin-de-siècle French music. When he returned to New York in 1907, as part of his professional duties at the Hackley School he performed works by Ravel, Scriabin, and especially Debussy in occasional recitals. In his diaries he also recorded his critical judgments of particular orchestral works by Debussy that he had heard in performance; for example, he was fascinated by *Ibéria*, but found four excerpts from *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* disappointing.<sup>8</sup> In 1915 Griffes went to some length to prepare and publish his own piano transcription of the middle movement of Debussy's *Ibéria* suite, "Les Parfums de la Nuit," a project that never came to fruition due to copyright restrictions.<sup>9</sup> Finally, during the early 1910s he began freely experimenting in his music with such techniques as exotic scales, parallel voice leading, and a rich harmonic palette. In sum, it is not without reason that he is often referred to as the "American Impressionist" composer.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Examples in this generation include Edward MacDowell, John Knowles Paine, and Horatio Parker.

<sup>7</sup> From 1903–07 he studied at the Stern'sches Konservatorium in Berlin, and later privately with Englebert Humperdinck. For more details, see Anderson, *Charles T. Griffes: A Life*, 45–95.

<sup>8</sup> In his personal diaries for 1912, Griffes notes that he either performed or read through the following works by Debussy: "Pagodes" (10 March); "L'isle joyeuse," (17 April, 10 August); "L'Après-midi d'un faune" (19 April); "La soirée dans Grenade" (7 May); "La Cathédrale engloutie" (25 July); and Toccata, Sarabande, *Ibéria* (18 December). His critical opinions of Debussy's orchestral work appear on 25 September 1912 and 18 December 1914. I wish to express my gratitude to Donna Anderson for giving me the opportunity to peruse Griffes's diaries in her private collection.

<sup>9</sup> Maisel, *Charles T. Griffes*, 146 and 153.

<sup>10</sup> See Marion Bauer, "Impressionists in America," *Modern Music* 4/2 (1927), 19–20; and Beth Jennings Eggers, "Charles Tomlinson Griffes, Portrait of an American Impressionist," *American Music Teacher* 32/1 (1982): 28–29.

However, this epithet would be misleading as a characterization of his oeuvre as a whole, as his particular brand of eclecticism was far broader in scope. At different junctures in his mature work, Griffes was also inspired by the music and/or poetry of Japanese, Javanese, Celtic, American Indian, and—as I will argue below—British traditions. Ultimately, all of his exotic tastes, whether occidental or oriental, are united by a single sensibility. At a time when some composers were eager to establish an American national identity, Griffes succeeded in synthesizing elements of various exotic traditions into a highly personal musical language.<sup>11</sup> One of the principal goals of my study is to begin to calibrate Griffes’s eclecticism, to identify the sources of his unique stylistic language, and to better understand the particular musical dialect of a specific piece.

#### ANALYTICAL METHOD

Before addressing Griffes’s musical setting and its historical context in detail, it is necessary to clarify in what ways I have adapted Heinrich Schenker’s theory of musical structure and analytical technique. Two methodological questions emerge: How can a theory of monotonicity apply to a piece that is nearly bereft of authentic cadences? And how can the concept of “motivic parallelism” serve as a musical metaphor to depict the poem’s central image? Each will be discussed below.

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed overview of various aesthetic influences that inspired Griffes’s style, see David M. Reeves, “Selected Songs of Charles T. Griffes: An Examination of the Relationship Between Words and Music” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1989). For more information on the generation of American composers born in the 1870s and ’80s, see Nicholas E. Tawa, *Mainstream Music of Early Twentieth-Century America: The Composers, Their Times, and Their Works* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992). Tawa argues that composers as diverse as Charles Wakefield Cadman, Frederick Shepherd Converse, Arthur Farwell, Henry Gilbert, Henry Hadley, Arthur Shepherd, and Deems Taylor each developed a highly eclectic style.

For Schenker, fragmentary harmonic progressions such as those found at the opening of "The White Peacock" are associated with the "auxiliary cadence" (*Hilfskadenz*), which designates a progression that lacks a tonic as the point of departure. In his original conception, a progression is "auxiliary" if it is an "incomplete transference of form of the fundamental structure" or, in other words, a deformation of the *Ursatz*.<sup>12</sup> L. Poundie Burstein, in his dissertation and in a recent article, clarifies Schenker's various comments on such progressions, developing a veritable "field guide" for classifying different species of off-tonic beginnings found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century repertoire.<sup>13</sup> When a progression lacks not only an initial tonic but also a final tonic chord, then it qualifies as an "auxiliary divider." What is distinctive about this latter kind of progression is that a key can be strongly suggested, even established, without the tonal center ever making an appearance—without the usual harmonic head or tail. Griffes joins the ranks of other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century composers, such as Richard Wagner, Franz Liszt, and Alexander Scriabin, who expanded the scope of auxiliary progressions so as to encompass entire operatic scenes and/or pieces. In recent years, Liszt's late music has been an analytical showcase for scholars such as Robert Morgan and James Baker, who have both explored various ways in which dissonant sonorities organize the harmonic structure of an entire work.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> L. Poundie Burstein, "Unraveling Schenker's Concept of the Auxiliary Cadence," *Music Theory Spectrum* 27/2 (2005), 161.

<sup>13</sup> Burstein, "Unraveling Schenker's Concept." Also see L. Poundie Burstein, "The Non-Tonic Opening in Classical and Romantic Music" (Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1988), 100.

<sup>14</sup> Robert P. Morgan, "Dissonant Prolongation: Theoretical and Compositional Precedents," *Journal of Music Theory* 20/1 (1976): 49–91; and James M. Baker, "The Limits of Tonality in the Late Music of Franz Liszt," *Journal of Music Theory* 34/2 (1990): 145–173. Baker introduces the concept of "implicit" tonality in which a single key could create overall unity in a work without ever receiving the traditional cadential confirmation. A more recent essay by David Carson Berry revives Weber's concept of "Mehrdeutigkeit" as a means of throwing new light on Liszt's late work; see Berry, "The Meaning(s) of 'Without': An Exploration of Liszt's *Bagatelle ohne Tonart*," *Nineteenth Century Music* 27/3 (2004): 230–262.

That said, Schenker's assumption of tonal coherence goes only so far in explaining the harmonic syntax of a work that lacks the closure usually associated with a final cadence. In essence, the conception of "auxiliary" is a form of negation, denoting the absence rather than the presence of traditional melodic/harmonic norms at the work's background.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, "The White Peacock" lacks a traditional background structure in that the soprano never completes an *Umlinie* descent, nor does the bass ever arrive at a structural tonic. However, even though all of Schenker's idealist assumptions about tonality may not be fulfilled in this work, his reductive techniques, along with the tonal hierarchy on which they depend, are quite useful in uncovering an intricate web of motivic connections that links its luxuriant surface with deeper levels of abstraction.

Schenker's concept of "motivic parallelism" plays a central role in my interpretation of Griffes's piece. Especially since the appearance of Charles Burkhart's landmark study in 1978,<sup>16</sup> analysts have employed this idea as a means of finding motivic connections between the microscopic and macroscopic levels of a work. For example, in her study of text and music relations in Schubert's "Der Erlkönig," Deborah Stein argues that the direct association between motives—both diatonic and chromatic—and specific characters in Goethe's text reflects the poem's ongoing tonal drama.<sup>17</sup> And in a detailed study of Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*, Mark Anson-Cartwright makes an eloquent case that the augmented triad as chord and as melody helps unify the motivic and large-scale tonal structure of the work.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, my interpretation of Griffes's work will

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<sup>15</sup> Burstein, "Unraveling Schenker's Concept," 182. It should be pointed out that in this context the Schenkerian term "dividing dominant" is problematic because, strictly speaking, the dominant cannot "divide" a pitch space if the structural tonic never appears before or after it.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Burkhart, "Schenker's 'Motivic Parallelisms,'" *Journal of Music Theory* 22/2 (1978): 145–175.

<sup>17</sup> Deborah Stein, "Schubert's *Erlkönig*: Motivic Parallelism and Motivic Transformation," *19th-Century Music* 13/2 (1989): 145–158.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Anson-Cartwright, "Chord as Motive: The Augmented-Triad Matrix in Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*," *Music Analysis* 15/1 (1996): 57–71.

trace the rich motivic unity between an initial dissonant chord and its transformation into elongated melodic spans. My approach differs from those of Stein and Anson-Cartwright in that I explore the combined effects of recurring pitch motives, an expansion of register, and a penultimate suggestion of formal ambiguity. Taken together, these multiple correspondences between the musical surface and deeper levels of contrapuntal structure constitute a collective "motivic magnification" and serve as a compelling musical metaphor for the central image of Sharp's poem.<sup>19</sup>

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The image of the peacock belongs to a rich history of exotic and even supernatural associations, stretching from ancient China through the Roman Empire to nineteenth-century Europe. For example, the Romans associated the bird with Juno, the queen of the gods; with the personification of pride; and, most important, with immortality, for the animal's cooked flesh was believed to resist decay. In more recent times the peacock became one of the most characteristic visual symbols of the leading artistic movement in late-Victorian England: aestheticism. This movement began among writers and painters in Great Britain during the 1870s and '80s, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Swinburne, and William Morris, and later was adapted in America within the fine and decorative arts and architecture.<sup>20</sup> In his celebrated *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, the English critic Walter Pater helped justify this new ideal of beauty

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<sup>19</sup> Finally, this study is highly sympathetic to Richard Cohn's plea for analysts to search for a "unifying generative scheme" of motivic relations that interacts with the *Ursatz* hierarchy yet also preserves its own autonomy. See Cohn, "The Autonomy of Motives in Schenkerian Accounts of Tonal Music," *Music Theory Spectrum* 14/2 (1992), 169.

<sup>20</sup> See *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner (New York: Grove, 1996), I, 170–171. For a sweeping overview of the influence of this movement in American culture, see *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement*, ed. Doreen Bolger Burke (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986).

and the sheer pleasure to be derived from it.<sup>21</sup> For artists of this “aestheticist” persuasion, the peacock signified not only their passion for sensuous pleasure but also their common fascination with the Orient. Its image was ubiquitous, adorning canvases, wallpaper, clothing, furniture, stained glass, and porcelain alike. In 1877 the American expatriate James Whistler used this bird and its feathers as the central theme of his design for a wealthy patron’s luxuriant dining room (since dubbed “the peacock room”), which was transformed into “a veritable land of porcelain embody[ing] a fantasy view of ‘the Orient’ deeply embedded in European taste.”<sup>22</sup>

Other characteristics of the aestheticist movement include an attraction to synaesthesia, as well as a belief in the power of suggestion rather than exact statement—the latter of which reveals no small debt to the French Symbolists. In the final section I will provide compelling evidence that Griffes’s musical tribute to the peacock participates in a synaesthetic pageant in which four different artistic media—literature, painting, theater, and music—all intersect.

The literary history of this pale peafowl encompasses several leading British writers at the turn of the century, including D. H. Lawrence, Oscar Wilde, and especially William Sharp. Lawrence used this captivating image as the title of his first novel.<sup>23</sup> For Wilde, one of the leading figures of aestheticism, the bird occasionally served to highlight his playful mockery of traditional assumptions about gender, social class, and artistic expression itself. For example, in one of his best-known essays, entitled “The Decay of Lying,” he introduces the image of a white

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873). This definition of beauty was partly a reaction against the Victorian conception of art as an instrument of moral education. Swinburne, a leading figure in the “aesthetic” movement, penned a virtual credo for this approach: “Art can never be the handmaid of religion, exponent of duty, servant of fact, pioneer of morality” (quoted in Lionel Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement* [London: Phaidon Press, 1996], 11).

<sup>22</sup> Linda Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 9. For a detailed survey of other nineteenth-century depictions of peacocks, see Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement*, 50–65.

<sup>23</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *The White Peacock*, ed. Andrew Robertson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).



peacock as the epilogue to his argument that nature should imitate art rather than vice versa. In addition, the same image of a white bird—now multiplied a hundredfold—appears at a pivotal moment in his controversial play, *Salomé*.<sup>24</sup> Although no proof exists that Griffes read this particular essay, he was clearly enamored of the play, having attended it once and having heard Richard Strauss's opera based on it four times while living in Berlin.<sup>25</sup>

The writings of William Sharp are more difficult to classify. His work bears a sympathetic relationship with that of the "aestheticist" tradition in that he belonged to a generation of Victorian authors who defined themselves by a sense of exoticism. Yet in the 1890s Sharp could be considered an artistic chameleon whose literary style and very sexual identity was in the process of change. A sojourn to Italy in 1891 served as the turning point in his literary career, for from then until his death he assumed a female pseudonym, Fiona Macleod, who embodied the spirit of the ancient Celtic civilization. Sharp, along with such figures as W. B. Yeats, helped inaugurate the Celtic Renaissance movement (the so-called "Celtic Twilight") in late nineteenth-century England. While immersed in the myths and stories of the ancient Celts, Sharp focused primarily on their deeper spiritual character:

So far as I understand the "Celtic Movement," it is a natural outcome, the natural expression of a freshly inspired spiritual and artistic energy. . . . There is no racial road to

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<sup>24</sup> In *Salomé*, King Herod offers his step-daughter a gift of one hundred white peacocks if she will withdraw her request for John the Baptist's head, an offer she refuses. In the final paragraph of Wilde's essay "The Decay of Lying" the narrator says: "The final revelation is that Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art. . . . And now let us go out on the terrace, where 'droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost', while the evening star 'washes the dusk with silver'" (Oscar Wilde, *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. George F. Maine [London: Collins, 1948], 931).

<sup>25</sup> Maisel, *Charles T. Griffes*, 86–87. It is clear that Griffes admired the Irish author's poetry, as altogether he set seven of Wilde's poems for voice and piano (one of which he set twice); the only author he set more often was Heinrich Heine. Wilde had already introduced his unique brand of showmanship to American audiences during a twelve-month long lecture tour in 1882, but this would have had little influence on Griffes as it occurred two years before he was born. For a detailed account of this tour, see Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 157–191.

beauty, nor to any excellence. Genius, which leads thither, beckons neither to tribe nor clan, neither to school nor movement, but only to one soul here and to another there.<sup>26</sup>

Using his pseudonym, Sharp fashioned an artistic credo that strongly echoes the philosophy of artists in the “aesthetic” movement: “To live in beauty—which is to put into four words all the dream and spiritual effort of the soul of man.”<sup>27</sup>

The entire collection *Sospiri di Roma* (*Sighs of Rome*), from which “The White Peacock” is drawn, reflects the transformation that was taking place in Sharp’s literary persona. Whereas during the 1880s his poetic style had been conservative, chronicling the natural world in strict verse, beginning with this collection his poetry became more spontaneous and lyrical, abandoning strict versification schemes in favor of irregular and unrhymed measures. The poem in question reveals this transition, for characteristics of both styles are present, the old alongside of the new. If nothing else, “The White Peacock” captures the poet’s unbridled enthusiasm for his new source of inspiration:

“That moment began,” he declared, “my spiritual regeneration. I was a New Man, a mystic, where before I had been only a mechanic-in-art. Carried away by my passion, my pen wrote as if dipped in fire, and when I sat down to write prose, a spirit-hand would seize my pen and guide into inspired verse.”<sup>28</sup>

Griffes, too, was fascinated by spirituality, but the source of this fascination was certainly not a conventional religious faith. One sign of his spiritual leanings can be found in the literature

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<sup>26</sup> Fiona Macleod, “Celtic,” *Contemporary Review* 77 (1900), 672.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth A. Sharp, *William Sharp (Fiona Macleod): A Memoir* (New York: Duffield, 1910), 428.

<sup>28</sup> William F. Halloran, “W. B. Yeats, William Sharp, and Fiona Macleod: A Celtic Drama: 1887 to 1897,” *Yeats Annual* 13, ed. Warwick Gould (London: Macmillan, 1998), 68–69. For more details about the inspiration of the *Sospiri* collection, see Halloran, “William Sharp as Bard and Craftsman,” *Victorian Poetry* 10/1 (1972): 57–78. Flavia Alaya provides a general introduction to Sharp’s life and work in *William Sharp—“Fiona Macleod,” 1855–1905* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

he read, for Griffes was a voracious reader whose literary taste was truly expansive.<sup>29</sup> A careful study of the texts that inspired his music during his final years reveals a passion for various forms of spiritualism, visions of utopia, and mysticism in general. For example, the following works are associated with spiritual topics: *The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan*, poem by Samuel Coleridge (1917); the songs "In a Myrtle Shade," text by William Blake (1916), and "The Rose of the Night," text by Fiona Macleod (1918); and the chamber work, *The Kairn of Koridwen*, text by Edouard Shuré (1916). Yet among all the poets whose texts he used in his music, Sharp/Macleod holds a place of honor, as his poetry was the starting point for nine different works: four songs for voice and piano (three of which were orchestrated) and five pieces for solo piano.<sup>30</sup> While it is fair to say that throughout his adult life Griffes maintained a healthy skepticism toward organized religion, his attraction to mystical texts in his later years suggests at the very least a growing a curiosity about spirituality.<sup>31</sup>

In sum, during his final years Griffes became intertwined with one of the most controversial figures in late nineteenth-century English literature: William Sharp. The mutual fascination these artists shared for the same literary symbol—the white peafowl—shows that Griffes was reviving and, in the process, transforming a familiar symbol of late-Victorian culture and giving its spiritual character a new dimension.

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<sup>29</sup> Griffes preferred reading authors in their original language, including Théophile Gauthier, Paul Verlaine, Gustave Flaubert, and Octave Mirbeau in French; Nikolaus Lenau in German; and Gabriele d'Annunzio in Italian. For a partial list of books purchased between 1907 and 1914, see Donna K. Anderson, *The Works of Charles T. Griffes: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 509–510.

<sup>30</sup> These include *Three Poems of Fiona Macleod*, Op. 11, which comprises "The Lament of Ian the Proud," "Thy Dark Eyes to Mine," and "The Rose of the Night"; the free-standing song "War Song of the Vikings"; *Roman Sketches*, Op. 7, which comprises "The White Peacock," "Nightfall," "The Fountain of the Acqua Paola," and "Clouds"; as well as the piano solo, "De Profundis."

<sup>31</sup> For more on Griffes's unusual approach toward spirituality in general, see Maisel, *Charles T. Griffes*, 99–105.

## POETIC INTERPRETATION

Sharp's poem, given in Figure 1, is a catalogue of sensual delight, a celebration of the visual extravagance in a Roman garden.<sup>32</sup> The narrator meticulously describes specific varieties in this visual feast, including such exotica as oleander, pomegranate, and ilex, each with its own unique color. But the most wondrous sight of all is a white peacock, which emerges toward the end of the poem and unfolds its tail. The narrator's tone throughout is breathless, as though he or she was overwhelmed by such a magnificent display of Italian flowers and feathers. Its overall structure is episodic in that each of the poem's five sections begins with the words "Here where the. . .".<sup>33</sup> Although the pattern of syllables is relatively free, on the verge of being a prose-poem, near the end a significant shift occurs in the overall versification scheme. In the opening thirty-seven lines, Sharp establishes a general pattern of five syllables per line, or ten syllables for every two lines (with occasional exceptions such as lines 12 and 34). Beginning at line 38, however, the pattern shifts to mostly eleven syllables per line. This technical change is strategically placed within the overall poem, for the addition of one syllable helps build momentum, amplifying the impact of the bird appearing and its tail unfolding. While there can be no direct analogy between a poem's versification scheme and a musical work that lacks any text declamation, nevertheless there is an indirect resemblance between this syllabic shift and the enormous climax that ushers in the recapitulation.

One of the poem's most striking features is Sharp's use of ambiguity. Various pairs of opposites that arise throughout the poem—such as a single color vs. a profusion of colors, dream vs. reality, and sound vs. silence—are not what they seem. Instead, opposition merges into

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<sup>32</sup> The poem is taken from William Sharp, *Poems*, ed. Elizabeth A. Sharp (New York: Duffield, 1912), 156–158.

<sup>33</sup> As in much of his poetry in the collection, Sharp adopts an archaic mannerism, employing the suffix "-eth" for most verbs conjugated in the third-person singular.

**FIGURE 1.** William Sharp, "The White Peacock"

	Here where the sunlight Floodeth the garden, Where the pomegranate Reareth its glory		Here where the dream-flowers, The cream-white poppies Silently waver, And where the Scirocco, Faint in the hollows, Foldeth his soft white wings in the sunlight,
5	Of gorgeous blossom; Where the oleanders Dream through the noontides; And, like surf o' the sea Round cliffs of basalt,	30	And lieth sleeping Deep in the heart of A sea of white violets:
10	The thick magnolias In billowy masses Front the sombre green of the ilexes: Here where the heat lies Pale blue in the hollows,	35	Here, as the breath, as the soul of this beauty Moveth in silence, and dreamlike, and slowly, White as a snow-drift in mountain-valleys When softly upon it the gold light lingers:
15	Where blue are the shadows On the fronds of the cactus, Where pale blue the gleaming Of fir and cypress, With the cones upon them	40	White as the foam o' the sea that is driven O'er billows of azure agleam with sun-yellow: Cream-white and soft as the breasts of a girl, Moves the White Peacock, as though through the noontide A dream of the moonlight were real for a moment.
20	Amber or glowing With virgin gold: Here where the honey-flower Makes the heat fragrant, As though from the gardens	45	Dim on the beautiful fan that he spreadeth, Foldeth and spreadeth abroad in the sunlight, Dim on the cream-white are blue adumbrations, Shadows so pale in their delicate blueness That visions they seem as of vanishing violets,
25	Of Gulistan, Where the bulbul singeth Through a mist of roses A breath were borne:	50	The fragrant white violets veined with azure, Pale, pale as the breath of blue smoke in far woodlands. Here, as the breath, as the soul of this beauty, White as a cloud through the heats of the noontide Moves the White Peacock.
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resemblance and logic gives way to paradox. The best example of this can be found in Sharp's use of color. At first glance, the text seems dominated by the contrast between the pure white color of the bird and the stunning variety of colorful flowers blooming in the garden. Yet over the course of the poem the narrator employs images in which white is mixed with a contrasting hue: for example, white with gold (line 41) and later with azure and "sun-yellow" (line 43). By the end, the bird seems like a kind of magical, living mirror, reflecting and somehow intensifying the abundance of colors around it. Griffes himself alludes to the interaction between bird and garden in the program notes he prepared for a performance of the orchestral version of the work

by the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1919: “The music tries to evoke the thousand colors of the garden and the almost weird beauty of the peacock amid these surroundings.”<sup>34</sup>

This type of ambiguity is also evident in the garden itself. At some junctures in the poem the physical setting appears to be silent (see lines 31 and 39), allowing the reader to savor all the more the profusion of color and perfume. Here the garden seems to be in a state of absolute calm, a stillness signified by the image of a sleeping “scirocco”—what is normally a mercurial Mediterranean wind. This stillness is also associated with a dreamworld where moonlight appears at midday and where “the oleanders dream through the noontides.” Yet elsewhere in the poem the garden appears to be alive with sound (“the bulbul singeth,” line 26) and depicted with wild, violent imagery: sunlight “floodeth” onto the flowers, pomegranates “reareth,” and the magnolias gather like “surf o’ the sea.” The narrator’s effusions alternate between dreamlike references to moonlight and precise descriptions of individual flowers, as if to blur the distinction between fantasy and reality.

Ultimately, the poem’s central image is the bird itself. Amid this garden of abundance, the peacock begins to move, and somehow this simple act takes on greater proportions. The grammatical structure of the entire poem emphasizes the significance of this event: two of the three independent clauses (ending with a period) coincide with the words, “moves the white peacock” (lines 45 and 56). Here the question arises: What is moving, the entire bird or only its tail, folding and unfolding? Because the only specific action associated with the bird appears in lines 47–48 (“on the beautiful fan that he spreadeth / foldeth and spreadeth broad in the sunlight”), I will assume that the motion referred to is the opening and closing of the peacock’s tail.

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<sup>34</sup> Anderson, *Charles T. Griffes: A Life*, 164.

What is truly striking about this scene is less the differences between the garden and the bird than the resemblances—the degree to which the two are in sympathy with each other. One could even liken the tail unfolding to a flower blooming. By the poem's end, the various oppositions introduced along the way—one color and many colors, sound and silence—are all somehow symbolized by the white peacock, the "soul" of all this beauty. Sharp's paean to nature has a pantheistic character in a garden where flora and fauna coexist in perfect harmony. In short, the opening and closing of the bird's tail embraces all of the oppositions and paradoxes that are suggested in the poem and makes them whole. As we will see below, there is a strong correspondence between this ideal fusion of opposites and two aspects of Griffes's setting: his style of motivic development and his suggestive coda.

A brief word is in order regarding the relationship between Sharp's text and the published score. Griffes often chose the title of a given instrumental work and/or the poem with which it was associated *after* he had finished composing it. Examples include *Three Tone-Pictures*, Op. 5, and *Fantasy Pieces*, Op. 6.<sup>35</sup> The case of "The White Peacock," however, is different in that he chose the text before he began his compositional process. Both the 1917 and 1945 editions of "The White Peacock," published by G. Schirmer, include the same excerpt of the poem as a frontispiece: twenty-three of the total fifty-six lines.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> In May and June 1915, Griffes chose poetry for three movements of *Three Tone-Pictures*, Op. 5. "The Lake at Evening" uses a quotation from W. B. Yeats; "The Vale of Dreams" and "The Night Winds" use poems by Edgar Allan Poe. Though none of the movements of *Fantasy Pieces*, Op. 6, have descriptive titles, "Barcarolle" quotes two poems by William Sharp, "Notturmo" includes a quotation from Paul Verlaine, and the "Scherzo" quotes two sentences by Griffes himself. All of these pieces he had already composed. See Anderson, *The Works of Charles T. Griffes*, 209; and also Anderson, *Charles T. Griffes: A Life*, 125.

<sup>36</sup> The excerpt consists of the following: lines 1–7, 13–14, 29–31, 38–39, 40–41, 45–47, 49, 53–54, and 56. It is interesting to note that this excerpt includes the reference to the bird's tail ("Dim on the beautiful fan that he spreadeth," line 47). By contrast, the two extant manuscripts for the piece contain even fewer lines of the poem. One, located in the Gannett-Tripp Library at Elmira College (Elmira, NY), includes a slightly shorter excerpt of the poem that omits line 47; the other, located at the Library of Congress (Washington, DC), includes no text at all.

## LARGE-SCALE FORM

To set the stage for our study of Griffes's motivic manipulations, we must first consider the work's large-scale formal design: a traditional ternary plan. A more subtle formal device appears in the coda, where Griffes develops the opening motive, suggesting an alternative formal plan: perpetual repetition. As this pattern is set into motion only in the final bars, we will explore this interpretation when we consider the coda.

The ternary plan displayed in Figure 2 consists of two levels of detail: the higher level presents a modified ternary plan with a truncated recapitulation; the lower level shows different subsections within each larger section.<sup>37</sup> The principal analytical criteria for making these formal divisions are repetition and thematic contrast. Each of the three subsections in A1 has its own distinct thematic material. The a1 subsection is open-ended, beginning and ending on a dominant ninth chord. The overall effect is a fusion between the introduction and the following subsection. It is curious that when the opening motivic material returns in m. 46 (labeled as A2 on the diagram), this particular measure and a half is omitted. In the a2 subsection at m. 2, the soprano unfolds a descending chromatic theme which emphasizes an A<sup>#</sup> diminished-seventh arpeggio: C<sup>#</sup>–A<sup>#</sup>–G<sup>b</sup>–E; see Figure 3. When this arpeggio is combined with the accompanying B<sup>9</sup> chords in the same bar, an octatonic collection is formed (for which one may look ahead to Figure 9c). The third subsection, a3, introduces yet another contrasting theme, largely pentatonic, employing a diminution of the dotted rhythm first heard in m. 3. The profusion of distinct melodic themes within the A1 section, each with its own exotic collection (i.e., whole tone, octatonic, or pentatonic), seems an appropriate way of portraying the abundance of flowers in the garden.

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<sup>37</sup> My reading differs from previously published analyses in the multiple formal readings I offer. For an alternate interpretation, see Reginald Haché, "An Essay on the Music of Charles Griffes," *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 34 (1993): 32–42.



**FIGURE 2.** Griffes, “The White Peacock”: large-scale formal scheme

<i>mm.</i>	0	2	7	18	27	35	46	50	60
<i>sect.</i>	Intro	A1		B		Dev	A2		Coda
<i>subsect.</i>	a1	a2	a3	b1	b2	c/a	a2	a3	a1

**FIGURE 3.** Griffes, “The White Peacock”: anacrusis to m. 1 (i.e., m. 0) through m. 6

Larghetto

una corda

pp

**FIGURE 4.** Griffes, “The White Peacock,” mm. 0–15: two levels of middleground graphs

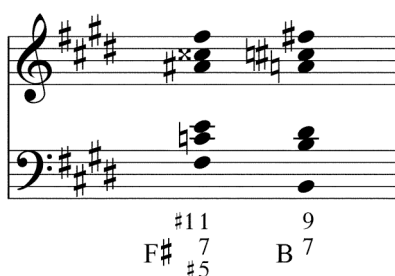
**FIGURE 5.** Griffes, “The White Peacock”: middleground reduction of complete piece

When the overall harmonic and contrapuntal organization of the opening section is taken into account, the work’s meditative character takes on new proportions. In the two middleground reductions of mm. 0–15, displayed in Figure 4, the  $V^9$  chord serves as a starting point for the bass’s diminished-fifth span ( $B-F\flat$ ), which will play a more important role when it returns in the B section. Furthermore, the soprano prolongs  $C\sharp$  ( $\hat{6}$ ) by means of a serpentine string of upper and lower neighbors. Figure 5 provides a middleground reduction of the entire work.

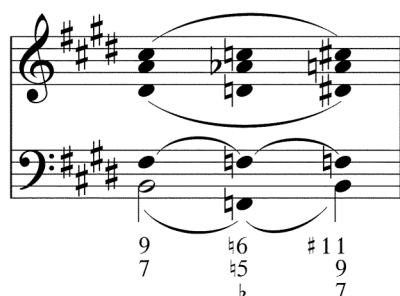
#### MOTIVIC MAGNIFICATION

The strongest correspondence between the poem’s image of the tail unfolding and Griffes’s musical setting is what I will call *motivic magnification*. To appreciate this phenomenon fully, it is useful to examine two different musical motives—one nested inside the other—that both undergo some kind of temporal magnification. The opening half cadence, ending on the dominant ninth chord, is expanded in mm. 43–46 (see Figure 6); then the same chord is transformed into a linear-melodic span between mm. 18 and 46. Each will be explored in close detail.

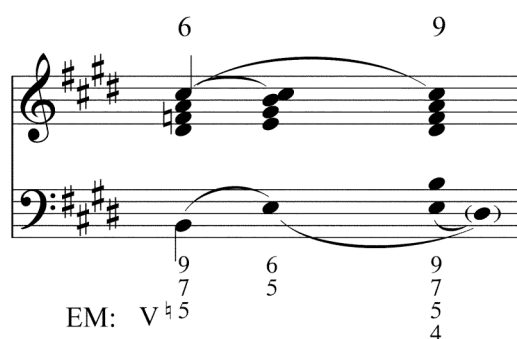
All three subsections of A1 are united by a single  $V^9$  chord, which resounds over and over again, alternating with contrasting contrapuntal, homophonic, or monophonic textures (see again the excerpt in Figure 3). The overall effect is a kind of harmonic stasis in which the sense

**FIGURE 6.** Griffes, "The White Peacock," mm. 0–1: harmonic reduction**FIGURE 7.** Griffes, "The White Peacock"

(a) mm. 3–6: harmonic reduction



(b) mm. 6–9: harmonic reduction



of forward motion has been nearly suspended. Indeed, the chord's traditional harmonic function begins to recede in favor of its role as pure sonority, as a source of instrumental and timbral color. The resounding dominant could also be interpreted as a direct reflection of the poem's episodic structure (i.e., the recurring phrase, "Here where the . . ."). It is as if the recurring sonority evokes a meditative atmosphere, a tolling  $B^9$  bell that becomes the object of our musical contemplation.

When this chord is considered along with the anacrusis that precedes m. 1, the passage as a whole becomes a musical aphorism, standing apart from the rest of the piece—as if the peacock were intoning some kind of musical mantra. This aphorism, like the garden itself, is a mixture of opposites: two-part counterpoint in short rhythms (3 against 7) leads to a sustained seven-note chord: melody vs. harmony. The pitch material of these two textures is also highly

contrasting: the whole-tone scale followed by a more diatonic collection. Finally, the roots of the two implied chords create descending-fifth motion: F $\sharp$  and B (Figure 6). Throughout much of the A section (mm. 0–17) Griffes employs variants of this gesture, a panorama of half cadences, combining half-step motions with common tones. Two harmonic variants are worth mentioning because, in each, a different pitch of the V<sup>9</sup> chord is delayed, creating some kind of unresolved dissonance. The first variant appears in mm. 3–6 (see Figure 7a), where the fifth of the triad, F $\sharp$ , lags behind as an F $\flat$ , forming (enharmonically) a dominant ninth with raised eleventh, presented here in the tenor voice. As it turns out, this harmony becomes the basis of motivic magnification over the entire B section. In the second variant in m. 11, shown in Figure 7b, it is the bass's E that lags behind the upper voices, creating an open fifth (E–B) juxtaposed below a dominant ninth chord.

Griffes's use of an aphorism as an opening gesture in this work suggests another link with Debussy. In a fascinating study of Debussy's compositional technique and its broader aesthetic context, James Hepokoski explores the French composer's reliance on aphoristic openings in a wide variety of works.<sup>38</sup> Although Griffes's two-part gesture does not fit neatly into any of Hepokoski's three categories, it belongs unmistakably to the late nineteenth-century tradition of non-periodicity, mystery, and the ritual of art substituting for religion, which can be traced back to Mallarmé and before that to Wagner. Hepokoski concludes: "Once art has thus been sacralized, even as an aesthetic fiction, the mode of entry into a work suggests *ipso facto* a corridor or vehicle of passage from one experiential realm to another." Thus, it becomes an entrance rite from the profane to the sacred.<sup>39</sup> It seems that "The White Peacock's" opening

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<sup>38</sup> James A. Hepokoski, "Formulaic Openings in Debussy," *19th-Century Music* 8/1 (1984): 44–59.

<sup>39</sup> Hepokoski, "Formulaic Openings in Debussy," 54. The three categories of openings are monophonic, modal/chordal, and introductory sequences/expansions (see 45–51). In addition, the direct parallels between Griffes's "The

gambit reenacts one of the favorite music-aesthetic rituals of his French predecessor.

Following the introduction, the opening aphorism reappears three more times in the work: once in mm. 43–46, as an expanded and somewhat disguised statement; and two exact repetitions in mm. 60–66, the latter of which serve as a symmetrical arch between the introduction and coda (or prelude and postlude). The first of these two statements is worth exploring in greater detail vis-à-vis Griffes's treatment of harmony, melody, dynamics, and rhythm.

An important feature of the underlying harmonic structure of mm. 43–46 is the bass's half-step motive, C–B, shown in Figures 8a and 8b. When the final two chords in Figure 8b are compared with the opening harmonic progression summarized in Figure 6, the stepwise voice leading is exactly the same, but the voices' vertical order has been rearranged. Most important, the inner voice's half step motion, C–B, now appears prominently in the bass. Figure 8b shows how Griffes develops the bass's half-step motion by employing a rising third leap, C–E, which he then fills with a chromatic descent derived from the soprano's chromatic scale in m. 2. The harmonic progression in this passage highlights the tritone, C and F $\sharp$ , for these two triads appear in the bass's composed-out third, either in root position or inverted with added seventh.<sup>40</sup>

One of the most distinctive features of mm. 43–46 is Griffes's ability to fuse two different exotic scales, whole tone and octatonic, into a single climactic gesture. First is the soprano's

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White Peacock" and the opening flute solo in Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* are striking: both employ a chromatic melodic gesture descending from C $\sharp$ , and both begin by repeating the opening aphorism twice. However, there is no evidence that Griffes was either quoting from or commenting upon this particular prelude by Debussy.

<sup>40</sup> An argument can be made that the expanded statement of the opening motive straddles two sections (falling at the end of section B and the beginning of section A2), and thereby blurs the formal boundary between them. According to such an interpretation, the return of A would coincide with the bass's subsidiary prolongation of  $b\flat$  at m. 43, the very apex of the climax, rather than with the V<sup>9</sup> at m. 46, the calm after the chromatic storm. Although such an elision would create a slight discrepancy between the arrival of the motive at m. 43 and the point of formal division at m. 46, it does not undermine the overall ternary design.

**FIGURE 8.** Griffes, “The White Peacock,” mm. 43–46: two levels of middleground and foreground

(a)

(b)

(c)

fragment,  $F^\sharp-E-D\flat-C\flat$  (Figure 8c), which is drawn from the same whole-tone collection that made its initial appearance in the opening aphorism. Although the pitch material of this melodic descent soon becomes more chromatic, the reference to the opening whole-tone arabesque is unmistakable. Finally, the chord created by a disjunct melody ( $C\flat-A^\sharp-C^\times$ ) against the bass at the end of m. 45 is a revoicing of the same pitches from the anacrusis to m. 1.

**FIGURE 9.** Griffes, "The White Peacock": octatonic collections

The octatonic collection plays a more subtle role in mm. 43–46 than the whole-tone scale. The pitch content of the most prominent chords of the passage, C and F<sup>#7</sup>, provides six of the eight pitches of the octatonic scale beginning with C–C<sup>#</sup>. Another octatonic scale, with the opposite alternation of half and whole steps, already appeared in mm. 3–4: B<sup>9</sup> followed by an F-minor chord with added sixth provides all eight pitches of the scale beginning with C–D. (These scales are displayed in Figures 9a and 9c.) Finally, in mm. 38–40, Griffes helps prepare for the climax by using the same octatonic collection as mm. 3–4 (missing only the note D), but now as a *melodic* motive; see Figure 9b. Here the two hands move in contrary motion, one twice as fast as the other, above a fixed D in the bass. Whereas the right hand ascends from E<sup>b</sup>4 to E<sup>b</sup>5, traversing an octatonic path, the left hand descends through three octaves, E<sup>b</sup>6 to E<sup>b</sup>3, repeating a chromatic motive derived from m. 2. The overall effect is an explosion of exotic scales and chromatic harmony—a fitting prelude to the unveiling of the bird's glorious tail.

A further point of resemblance between the two passages is Griffes's use of dynamics over the entire section. The gradual crescendo and sudden decrescendo in mm. 37–47 mirrors the precise tapering of dynamics found in the opening gesture (mm. 0–2). There are two differences between these passages: in the former the extremes in dynamics are greater, from pianissimo to





**FIGURE 11.** Griffes, "The White Peacock," mm. 18–46: two levels of middleground (bass motive marked by beam)

(a)

(b)

material of the A section—as if the  $B^9$  chord were a motivic seed and the bass unfolding were the germination of that seed. Of course, throughout the opening measures there are a profusion of  $B^9$  chords that saturate the harmonic texture (mm. 1–3, 6, 15–17). However, one chromatically inflected variant in particular, a  $B^9$  with raised eleventh (or raised fourth),  $B-D\sharp-F\flat-A-C\sharp$ , found in m. 6, serves as a harmonic premonition of the overarching ninth span and its division into thirds. (Figure 7a showed the linear origin of this chord.) The collection appears only once more in the piece, as a vertical sonority in the recapitulation (m. 50). The other source of the ninth span is an arpeggiated motive in the bass that prolongs the  $B^9$  beneath the soprano's descending chromatic scale in mm. 2–3, as was shown in Figure 3. All five pitches of the original chord appear but in slightly different order:  $C\sharp-A-F\sharp-B-D\sharp$ .

A crucial feature of this middleground sketch is the way in which the bass's ninth span is divided into constituent parts. The first two thirds in the arpeggio (beamed in Figure 11) spell an augmented triad,  $C\sharp-A-F\sharp$ , which culminates at m. 36 in a reprise of the opening motivic material in F major. The pair of descending major thirds can also be described using neo-Riemannian hexatonic operations, as an alternating cycle of "Parallel" and "Leittonwechsel" operations (P–L–P–L).<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the remaining diminished-fifth span highlights the octatonic character of the bass descent:  $F\sharp-D\sharp-D\flat-C-B$ . Within that descent, the bass's  $D\sharp$  participates in a voice exchange with the soprano's  $D\flat$ . As a whole, the internal subdivision of the ninth span in mm. 18–46 reflects two of the three exotic scales found in this work: the whole tone and the octatonic.

This large-scale ninth span plays several roles in the work's formal organization. To begin with, it emphasizes two junctures in the overall ternary scheme. The span not only unifies the B and development sections under a single sweeping gesture, it also dramatizes the beginning of the recapitulation. In addition, this composed-out arpeggiation synthesizes melodic intervals from previous diminutions in the bass that prolong the dominant: a diminished fifth,  $B-F-B$  (see again Figure 7a), and a minor third,  $B-D-B$  (explored more fully in Figure 12). These two intervals both participate in the all-encompassing arpeggiation of Figure 11. Finally, as this motive composes-out a chromatically altered version of a  $B^9$  chord—the so-called "mantra" chord from the opening section—it unifies the melodic and harmonic dimensions of the work. The vertical becomes the horizontal. In linking the microcosmic and macrocosmic dimensions of the work, this melodic span provides a vivid musical metaphor for the unfolding of the bird's tail.

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<sup>41</sup> For a fascinating commentary on the interdependence of Schenkerian and neo-Riemannian analytical methods in the study of a particular complex of major thirds, see Matthew Bribitzer-Stull, "The  $A\flat-C-E$  Complex: The Origin and Function of Chromatic Major Third Collections in Nineteenth-Century Music," *Music Theory Spectrum* 28/2 (2006): 167–190.

**FIGURE 12.** Griffes, "The White Peacock," mm. 14–15: chromatic bass diminution

(a)

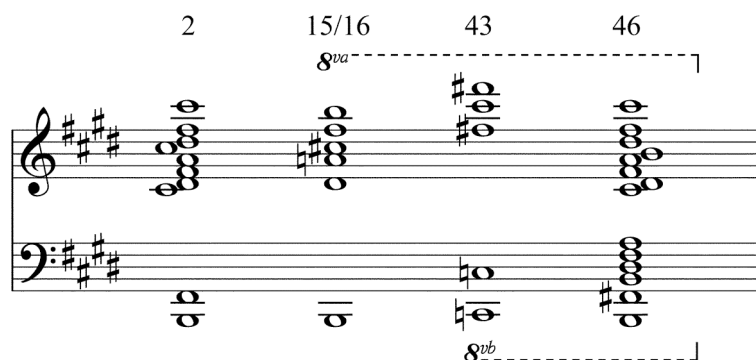
(b)

A second dimension of motive magnification in this work can be found in Griffes's treatment of register. In an interview in 1919, he said

When I went to Germany, I was of course ready to be swept under by the later Wagner and Strauss; it is only logical I suppose that when I began to write [music] I wrote in the vein of Debussy and Stravinsky; those particular wide intervalled dissonances are the natural medium of the composer who writes today's music.<sup>42</sup>

This remark is telling, for it encapsulates his sensitivity not only for "widely spaced" dissonances but also for the character of pitch space itself—how it is created and traversed. The point of departure for any discussion of register in this work is the opening B<sup>9</sup> chord. What is striking is not only its overall range (just over three octaves) but also the open space in the middle between the two hands. In the following measure the range is immediately broadened to four octaves when the soprano leaps up to C<sup>#</sup>6.

<sup>42</sup> "Artist Needs No Patriotic Aid," *Evening Sun* (New York), 19 December 1919; quoted in Anderson, *Charles T. Griffes: A Life*, 186.

**FIGURE 13.** Griffes, “The White Peacock,” mm. 2–46: expansion of register

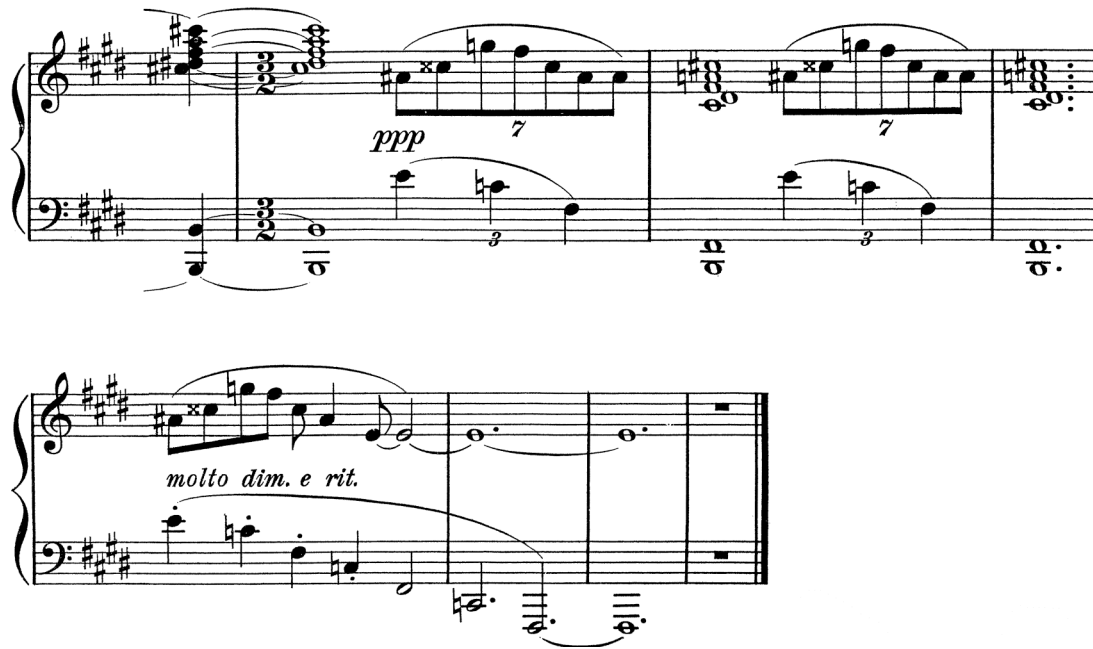
Throughout the B section, Griffes employs sweeping scales and arpeggios that quickly change register (e.g. mm. 39–42). But he saves the ultimate expansion in pitch space for the climactic section in mm. 43–46. The soprano’s largely stepwise descent in constant quarter notes is truly breathtaking, traversing more than two and a half octaves: F<sup>#</sup>6 to A4. Beneath this stately descent, the lower part reaches down to C2 amid its frenzied arpeggiated figures. At m. 46 the familiar B<sup>9</sup> sonority returns, now inhabiting six octaves: B1 to C<sup>#</sup>7. Figure 13 displays these two chords along with the C-major triad in m. 44, which reaches even higher. By repeating the initial lush sonority at the recapitulation and increasing its register in both directions, Griffes uses an expansion of space to portray the unveiling of the peacock’s tail in all its white glory.

#### PERPETUAL REPETITION

Griffes’s setting of the white peacock falls within the nineteenth-century tradition of the “Romantic fragment,” as propounded in the writings of Friederich Schlegel. Recent musicologists such as Charles Rosen and John Daverio have eloquently examined how composers adapted this aesthetic ideal in various ways—for example, in works that lack either a conventional beginning, ending, or both.<sup>43</sup> Rosen describes this ideal in rather violent terms: “The form is not fixed

<sup>43</sup> See John Daverio, *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993); and Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

FIGURE 14. Griffes, "The White Peacock," mm. 60–66



but is torn apart or exploded by paradox, by ambiguity . . . implying a past before the [work] begins and a future after its final chord.”<sup>44</sup> As will be shown below, Griffes renews this ideal in the coda by hinting at a musical form that transcends its own boundaries and, thereby, evokes eternity.

The coda performs an essential role in Griffes's setting, for it introduces a paradoxical element that is central to Sharp's poem. In mm. 60–66 (Figure 14), the piano repeats the opening gesture twice; then a third statement begins and is interrupted, while both soprano and bass are arpeggiating the opening whole-tone chord. This fragmentation is striking, as if listeners hear the first “half” of a half cadence, but are denied the chord of arrival. Because the entire gesture has already occurred four times—twice in the introduction and twice near the end—the listener is left to contemplate two different interpretive scenarios. On the one hand, does the entire work

<sup>44</sup> Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, 51.

possess formal closure, the coda serving as a suggestive but still rather insignificant element within the overall ternary scheme? On the other hand, is the rest in the final measure merely a momentary silence before the piece picks up again? Indeed, does this final passage inaugurate the beginning of another statement of the B section that is never realized—as if the overall form were continuing in perpetual repetition, a confirmation of the immortal powers that the ancient Romans believed the bird possessed? According to this interpretation, the entire work ends on a note of uncertainty: Will the tail unfold one more time, or continue opening and closing forever? Has the postlude become a new prelude, the musical “tail” becoming a new head? Is the return of the opening gesture a prophecy to be fulfilled or a promise to be broken?

In the context of Griffes’s musical peacock, the choice between competing readings must finally be placed within a larger interpretive framework where reconciliation is possible. The peacock and garden together create a vision of spirituality, an epiphany of natural beauty, where pairs of opposites somehow come together. A kind of musical paradox arises from the listener being able to perceive the final passage (mm. 60–66) as both closed and open at the same time—closed in that the piece has already completed a familiar formal pattern, and open in that it inaugurates a new pattern that remains unfulfilled.<sup>45</sup> The music beckons its listeners to contemplate this paradox and then transcend it. The work affords the potential for the audience not only to perceive various conflicts between opposites, but ultimately to reconcile them into a new synthesis: the bird and the garden, calmness and motion, closed and open, ternary design and a design of perpetual repetition. While Sharp’s original poem evokes the mystery of a white

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<sup>45</sup> Ramon Satyendra offers a fascinating discussion of the role that paradox plays in Liszt’s late music. In his view, dissonant sonorities such as an extended dominant can be closed and open at the same time: open in that the structural dissonance points beyond itself to an imaginary resolution, and closed in that dissonant sonority defines a structural framework as either a point of departure, of arrival or both; see Satyendra, “Liszt’s Open Structures and the Romantic Fragment,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 19/2 (1997): 184–205.

bird opening its tail amid an extravagant garden, Griffes's setting magnifies and enhances this mystery, giving the poem's spiritual character a new dimension.

#### EPILOGUE

My portrait of "The White Peacock" would not be complete without exploring an uncanny embodiment of synaesthesia, or blending of the senses, that this work brings to life. In reviving this concept, artists of the "aesthetic" movement such as Sharp were borrowing a page from early Romantic writers in France like Théophile Gautier (and later Symbolists like Charles Baudelaire) who had advocated a synthesis or "transposition" of different artistic traditions in which sonnets would be called pastels and pastels sonnets. Later in the century Whistler, a painter who sympathized with the aestheticist program, exemplified this idea when he regularly borrowed musical themes as titles for his paintings, including "harmony," "note," "symphony," and "nocturne."<sup>46</sup>

In Griffes's case, it is as if the bird's tail had fanned out backwards in time, embodying a miniature genealogy of artistic culture covering nearly thirty years and encompassing four different media: music, poetry, art, and drama. Griffes was inspired by a poem that itself had two previous sources of inspiration (of which he was most likely unaware). According to Sharp's wife Elizabeth, "The White Peacock" was intended as a literary tribute to Théodore Roussel, a French artist and student of James Whistler, whose work Sharp had admired. In her biography of her husband, Elizabeth reports an entry in his diary dated February 1891: "In forenoon wrote

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<sup>46</sup> Among Whistler's most famous works are a series of three works entitled "Symphony in White" each of which is a portrait of a woman (or pair of women), clothed in a picturesque gown and rendered in various shades of white.

‘The White Peacock’ (56 lines)—a study in Whites for Théodore Roussel.”<sup>47</sup> This reference is most likely to one of several works by Roussel, who lived near the Sharps in Chelsea during the early 1890s. In 1888, after having seen a play entitled *Le Baiser* (*The Kiss*), by Théodore de Banville, performed outdoors in a suburb of London, Roussel fashioned a pastel entitled “Ma fonction est d’être blanc” and three prints, all of which depict the *commedia dell’arte* character Pierrot using countless textures and nuances of white; see Figure 15.<sup>48</sup> Although Sharp’s poem makes no mention of Pierrot, he shares with his French contemporary a fascination for subtle variations in white. It also suggests that a renewed interest in experimentation with color helped unite painters, poets, and composers as well, at the turn of the century. In short, Griffes’s peacock has a four-dimensional artistic heritage that traverses five countries and four different media: a play written by a French playwright inspired a pastel by a French painter living in England, which in turn inspired a poem written by a Scottish writer visiting Italy, which in turn inspired a piano work by an American composer living in rural New York.

To listen to Charles Griffes’s tone poem, “The White Peacock,” is to embark on a journey into early twentieth-century exoticism. The work underlines the artistic connection between an American composer living in New York and a Scottish writer living in Italy. There is a deep sympathy between William Sharp’s poetic vision—that is, the image of a bird’s tail in motion—and Griffes’s aural response to that image. In short, the opening, voluptuous V<sup>9</sup> sonority serves both as a recurring half cadence and a composed-out ninth span in the bass, and in the process it helps unify the work’s harmonic and melodic dimensions. Griffes magnifies the impact of this

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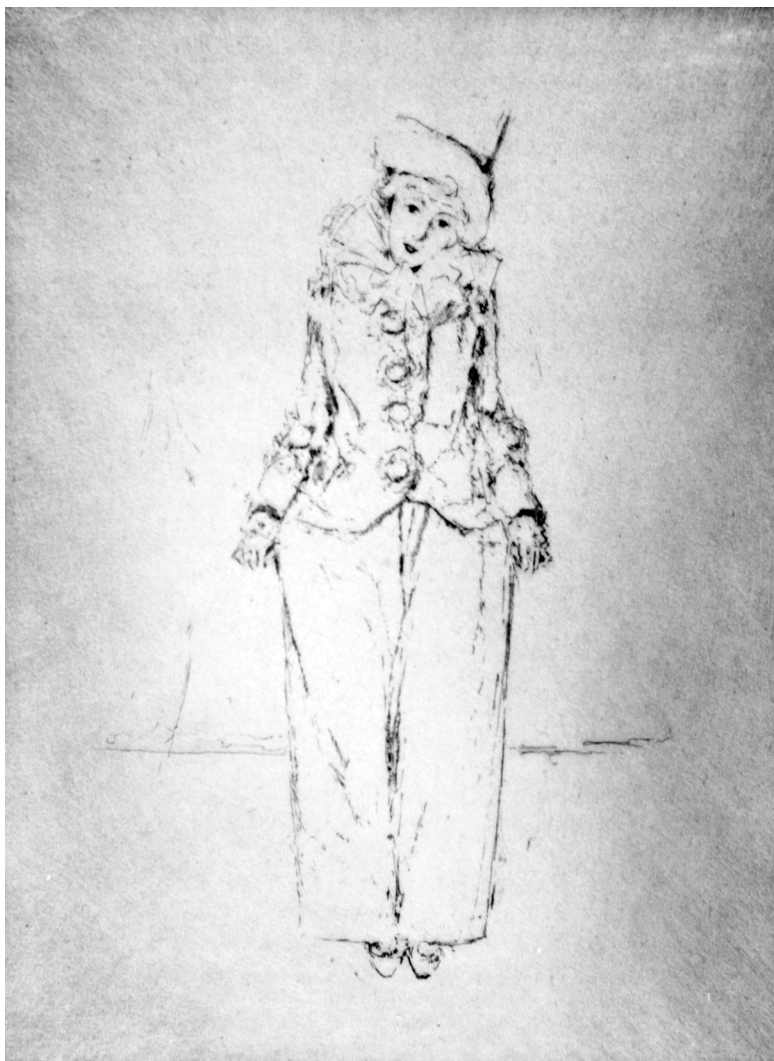
<sup>47</sup> Sharp, *William Sharp* (Fiona Macleod), 179.

<sup>48</sup> Three prints of this character exist, two of which depict the face of Pierrot (who was portrayed by an actress named Lady Archibald Campbell) and one a scene from de Banville’s play. All are reproduced in Margaret Dunwoody Hausberg, *The Prints of Théodore Roussel: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Lunenburg, VT: Meriden-Stinehour Press, 1991), 44-46.



sonority by repeating it at the beginning of the recapitulation and simultaneously expanding its registral placement in both outer voices. Furthermore, the piece's formal design suggests a conflict between two interpretations, one ternary and the other an intimation of perpetual repetition, a conflict that the listener is invited to transcend in the final measures. Finally, "The White Peacock" contributes to an American revival of the late Victorian movement of aestheticism and, in so doing, celebrates the luxuriant fusion of Eastern and Western cultures.

**FIGURE 15.** Théodore Roussel, "Pierrot, Portrait of the Lady A. C."  
(from Hausberg, *The Prints of Theodore Roussel*)



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## ABSTRACT

This essay provides an interdisciplinary study of Charles Griffes's monumental piano work, "The White Peacock," integrating historical, analytical, and literary perspectives. A strong correspondence exists between the poem's central image, the bird's unfolding tail, and three aspects of Griffes's setting: (1) his style of "motivic magnification," in which the initial lush dominant ninth chord is transformed into composed-out melodic spans in the bass; (2) a strategic expansion of register, coinciding with the recapitulation; and (3) his unusual treatment of form, which in the final measures suggests perpetual repetition. Finally, Griffes's work underlines his ties to European artistic culture by reviving and celebrating the peacock, one of the most vivid symbols of the late-Victorian movement of aestheticism.

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